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THE PRINCIPLE OF ADAPTATION IN REVELATION.

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JUDAISM, Christianity, and Mohammedanism have been called "positive religions" because they did not develop, acted upon by internal forces alone, operating silently from age to age, but were proclaimed by great religious leaders, who assumed to speak as the organs of divine authority, and departed from ancient faiths and traditions. Yet none of these three religions was in all respects new. Each was established on ground already occupied by older beliefs and usages. Each had to displace what it could not assimilate, and whether it rejected or absorbed the older cults, it had to reckon with these at every point, and assume a definite attitude toward them. Each of these positive religions had to take men as they were, and appeal to existing instincts and ideas. Therefore, to understand any one of these great systems, we need to know something of the faith which preceded. A clear interpretation of early Christianity requires familiarity with Judaism and Roman paganism. Recall how prominently the ideas of priesthood and sacrifice figure in the New Testament. For their explanation we are referred to Jewish worship. Here we meet the fact that sacrifice did not originate with the Jews, but reaches back to a remote past. Examination reveals the same fact regarding other features of Mosaism.

There are three distinct views concerning the origin of the Israelitish religion. The first is that it was an immediate revelation from God. Second, others hold it to be the product of human development. The third view considers that natural and revealed religion interpenetrated, so that the forms of revealed religion were affected by natural elements. The last view best accords with the facts as recent study discloses them. The influence of the Egyptian bondage, Canaanitish neighbors, and of the Assyrian conquests powerfully affected the Hebrew civilization

and religion, and we must reckon with these influences in any just estimate of Judaism. The explanation lies in the fact that all these peoples sprang from the same original stock. The Semitic races included the Arabs, Hebrews, Phœnicians, Aramæans, Babylonians, and Assyrians, who, in ancient times, occupied the Arabian peninsula together, with the fertile lands of Syria and Mesopotamia. This region was the birthplace of the three great positive religions above mentioned. Not only were these races allied by blood, but there was a high degree of similarity in political, social, and religious institutions. Investigation has established the fact that the original home of the Semitic tribes was not Mesopotamia, but Arabia. The religions of Assyria and the second Babylonian empire were of a comparatively late date, were syncretistic and civic, while that of the early Arabian tribes was simple, institutional, and traditional. The primitive cult, which chiefly consisted of simple rites, was preserved by the force of tradition. Now we find traces of these early Semitic rites and ideas in the Jewish economy evidently bearing the divine sanction. This brings us to an important inquiry: How shall we account for these heathen elements? If we admit their human origin, will this detract from the divine character and glory of the Old Testament revelation? Can we discover a principle which permitted and controlled the use of human elements in a system of revealed religion?

If we turn to the New Testament, we shall find that Jesus imparted truth to his disciples as they were able to receive and appropriate it. Further than this, we see that not all of the truth which the Savior taught was new to men. Foregleams of it we find in heathen thought. The Jewish dispensation as a preparation for Christianity had awakened expectations of the revelation which Jesus made. He used the messianic ideas as points of contact for his own teaching. He took men as he found them, and gradually unfolded in word and deed his revelation of the Father. Here, then, is a principle of adaptation to the limitations of men. We should naturally expect to find the same principle and method in the earlier stages of revelation. And since, in the Old Testament dispensation, the imperfect development

of the Jewish mind required that revelation be concrete in form, new ideas were taught through familiar institutions. God adapted truth to the minds of men as they were. We find the law of adaptation running through the whole process of God's self-manifestation to the chosen people. Revelation then, as in Christ's day, came to set in order what men already knew, to fill out half-truths, completing the circle of truth, and to add new truth. The method, as suggested, was concrete. The law of adaptation provided for the use of the forms and rites of natural religion, as the vehicles of divine truth. Here, then, was a basis in human thought and practice for a special revelation. The point of divergence should be noted. While God used an existing institution of natural religion, he invariably gave it a new meaning. The new idea was divine and in contrast to the heathen conception. The old rite received a new and higher significance. If God could take a physical phenomenon like the rainbow and make it the symbol of an idea and a sign of his promise, why could he not adopt the institutions of natural religion, and, imparting to them new meanings and purposes, make them the instruments of religious progress? Modern scholarship is showing us that this is the method which God pursued. The study of the remains of the early Semites discloses many institutions familiar to us in the Old Testament, but which are older than Moses. A few examples may profitably illustrate the principle.

1. A comparison of the heathen and Jewish ideas of God reveals the toleration of anthropopathisms and anthropomorphisms common to the former. The ancient Semite found himself a member of a natural society, which included gods and men. Religion was a feature of this social system. The connection between gods and men was physical, and was described in the terms of human relationship. God and man were literally of the same stock. The god was ruler in state and leader in war. The Semitic god was not ubiquitous. Each clan, however small, had its tribal god, whose jurisdiction was confined to his own territory. He did not venture beyond his own bounds, and could not protect his followers if they did so. To change one's

nation meant to change one's gods. This was an experience to be avoided; therefore we can see what the call of Abram (Gen. 12:1) involved. To forsake his land and kindred was to forsake the gods of his land for new gods in a strange land. Further, the Semitic god was the owner of the land whereon his people dwelt. All living creatures belonged to him, and all changes of weather and seasons were attributed to his agency. These relationships were acknowledged in all religious rites. The Semitic god was not ethical. Since he was physically connected with man, he was affected by the same passions that rule his children. We find, then, these ideas included in the early heathen conception of God: (1) he was the physical progenitor of his people, and they belonged to him; (2) he was a local god; (3) he owned the land and all living creatures upon it; (4) he was sensuous.

Now, do we recognize similar notions of God among the early Israelites? We find a sensuous idea of God which is familiar to all. Feelings and acts are ascribed to God in the language of men. God "is angry," "is sorry," "repents;" he "speaks," he "fights;" and he "smells" the savory odors of sacrifice. The Jews were inclined to limit the operations of Jehovah to their own people. He was not supposed to be doing anything to other nations except when these clashed with Israel. Doubtless the Egyptian bondage and their idea of their election fostered this notion of national exclusiveness, which had its advantages in developing a national spirit and integrity. We see that the later prophets conceived God to be Lord of the whole earth. But in the early days the Semitic notion of a local deity was common. So also Jehovah is represented as the owner of Canaan, and his people are promised this inheritance so long as they are obedient and faithful. The average Israelite regarded Jehovah as the patron God of his nation. Naomi said to Ruth: "Thy sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods" (Ruth 1:15). David accused those who drove him from his country of compelling him to serve "strange gods." In Judaism we find the idea of divine fatherhood, but dissociated from a physical basis. Man is created, not begotten. Sonship is of grace, not

of nature. "Israel is 'Jehovah's son,' but the creation refers to a series of gracious acts, by which they were shaped into a nation." This sonship was national, not individual. The development of the latter idea must wait for Christ. In addition to the spiritualization of the idea of fatherhood was the new ethical conception of God. Israel's God was holy. Even in setting forth this notion of God, new to the heathen mind, the transition was not too sharp. The word which described this characteristic was taken from evil associations and baptized with a new significance. The verb *qadhas* means "set apart," and originally referred to persons separated unto immoral purposes. The new meaning of the word is "sanctify," "set apart to holy purposes." Henceforth God is *qedhes*, "holy."

Thus it becomes apparent that the transition from the heathen to the Hebrew conception of God was gradual. Sensuous ideas lingered. God might have corrected these by working a miracle in human thought, but there is no evidence of such a miracle. God accommodated his self-revelation to these imperfect notions, satisfied to introduce at fitting stages new ideas, attaching them to former conceptions. Hebrew history is a long series of acts by which God gradually led his people to a right apprehension of himself. At every advance there was some point of connection with human thought.

2. Take a second feature of Old Testament religion, the parallel of which is found in heathen practice—sacred times. The most widely recognized was the sacred seventh day. The origin of this day is difficult to account for outside the Bible. The institution is one of those evidences which point to a primeval revelation known to all men. Such a revelation may not be demonstrable apart from the Bible, but among extra-biblical races there are hints of it. The most ancient records preserve the sacred character of the number seven. Whence this idea? That seven is a divisor of twenty-eight, the number of days in the lunar month, is an unsatisfactory explanation, for it does not show why four might not have been chosen. More than this, seven as a divisor of time was not confined to the Semitic races, but was almost universally recognized. The biblical record makes

the sabbath a permanent divine institution from the beginning of human history. Here, then, was the basis in human thought for the fourth commandment. This provision embodied in written law what had been stamped upon human thought and observed in practice for an unknown period of time.

But among the Jews the day received a new character. With neighboring peoples the sacred day was a feast day. Among the primitive Semites, religion chiefly consisted of propitiatory feasts for the gods. Two new characteristics were added to the Jewish sabbath: it was to be a rest day and a holy day. The sabbath was lifted out of the heathen associations by being connected with God's work of creation. It was the special character of this day, rather than the day itself, which marked it as new. It is a good example of the principle under consideration.

3. The sacred place furnishes another case in point. The gods were supposed to have certain homes or haunts. Some dwelt in heaven, some on the earth, others in the underworld, and still others in the waters. Appropriate offerings were made to these various classes of divinities. Fire-offerings were made to heavenly deities because the homage of the worshiper was supposed to ascend in the smoke. Gifts for sea-gods were cast into the water. The earthly divinities were approached by offerings left at some spot where a god had made himself known. Because of such a vision, the place was sacred. The potentates of the underworld were placated by gifts of food left in caves. When men built houses for themselves, they thought it becoming to erect sanctuaries to God. The temple was built on a sacred spot, that is, a place where God had manifested himself. There are many striking parallels of this practice in the Old Testament. A theophany or a victory was a sufficient reason for building an altar or a memorial. Thus Saul builds an altar at the site of his victory over the Philistines. Samuel sets up a stone and calls it Ebenezer. Some of these became prominent places of worship. After Jacob's vision, he concluded that the spot was sacred and named it Bethel. This place continued to be a center of worship until the captivity. At many of these

shrines, as Shechem and Beersheba, heathen idolatry coexisted with Jewish sacrifice. The mingling which ensued was a continual menace to Israel and constituted a fertile theme of prophetic preaching.

It is seen that worship in sacred places was not peculiar to Israel, but common to all the Semitic tribes. The idea was most fully exemplified in the centralization of worship in Jerusalem, which thereafter was the holy city. The recognition of sacred places was another clear case of divine accommodation to human conception. But here, as elsewhere, there was a new idea, namely, the supremacy and unity of God. God would not share his worship with another. The sacrifice on the high places in which there was an attempt to mingle the worship of Jehovah and Baal was repugnant to God, and, therefore, sternly rebuked by the prophets. Israel's God was one Lord, and would not divide his glory with heathen false gods.

4. The choice of Abraham in founding a nation and a religion was another condescension to human conceptions. Semitic religion, as we have seen, was associated with kinship. A god became connected with a certain family which developed into a clan. God entered into covenant with Abraham, promising certain blessings to him and his posterity. These privileges included the multiplication of the patriarch's offspring until they should become a great nation. The point of divergence from Semitic thought lay in the rejection of physical connection between Abraham and Jehovah, and in the expansion of the clannish idea. God told Abraham that in him and his seed all the families of earth should be blessed.

5. Circumcision was another human institution. Little is known of it save that it was very ancient and was widely practiced. There may have been hygienic reasons for the custom, yet it was chiefly a civic rite, and usually performed at the age of citizenship. Apparently it had no religious significance. Now God took this rite, set it back to infancy, and made it the sign of the covenant between himself and his chosen people. Here circumcision had not only a civic, but also a religious, significance. It was the mark of a citizen of the Hebrew theocracy.

6. So of the tithe. It was an old heathen tax imposed to maintain royal dignity. In most instances it was a heavy burden. The Lord prescribed the tenth for his people. It was devoted to the support of the temple and priesthood. This so far is in imitation of worldly sovereigns. The temple represented Jehovah's court. A new content was given to the idea of this tax. It was a recognition of God's ownership of all. Further, prosperity was promised to all who should be faithful in its observance. With the Jew it was preëminently a religious obligation calculated to enliven the sense of dependence upon God, and the necessity of acknowledging his sovereignty over them and the land.

7. Covenant-making was common among all early races, and exists to this day among many savage tribes. The original idea of the covenant was the establishment of fellowship between the parties to the compact. The ceremony varied. Sometimes it was the mingling of the blood of both parties in the veins of each, while some of the blood was sprinkled upon an altar, making the gods a party to the transaction. Again the act of eating together was sufficient to secure temporary fealty. So Abraham and the angel ate together (Gen. 18:8). Or the agreement might be sealed by the contracting parties passing between the divided parts of a slain animal. This is evidently what is meant in Gen. 15:10. The most common method was that of sprinkling the blood of a sacred animal upon both parties. The Old Testament parallel here is peculiarly close. When the covenant was ratified at Sinai, the blood was sprinkled upon the people and upon the altar, which represented God (Exod. 24:6-8). But with the form the parallel ends. Between God and Israel the covenant meant more than good-will. It required from the Israelites obedience to a law which revealed a holy God. This obedience had for its aim a holy people. This conception of a holy God and a holy nation was new.

8. No more conspicuous illustration of divine accommodation can be found than that of the Jewish sacrificial system. "Sacrifice has its source in human need. It is as ancient and as extensive as the race." The Semites had everything connected

with sacrificial worship—altar, sacrifice, and priest. The altar was a rough stone, or a pile of stones. The blood of the victim was sprinkled upon the altar. Observe the Old Testament examples. The existence of a separate body of persons as priests was an early characteristic of religion. So it was in Israel. Among early peoples the aim of sacrifice was the establishment of good fellowship between God and man. The propitiatory element was uppermost; hence the sacrificial ceremony was a feast. The god was supposed to participate. The choicest portions of the flesh and the blood were reserved for him. The blood was regarded as the life of the victim. The sacred animals included the ox, the sheep, and the goat, probably because they constituted almost the sole possessions of early pastoral peoples. Firstlings were regarded as the most valuable of animal offerings, because the blood of the parents was popularly supposed to flow purest in them. Human sacrifice was not uncommon, and was the most precious of all. It was familiar to Abraham, and, when enjoined upon him, the trial of his faith lay not in being required to offer the “fruit of his body,” but in giving up his only son, in whom centered all his hopes.

It seems plain that the Israelites retained in their sacrificial rites much that was common to other early peoples. But God lifted the whole system to a higher plane. He gave to the ceremonies a new content. The heathen sacrifices lacked the essentially religious elements. They knew nothing of the Old Testament conception of the holiness of God. The expiatory meaning of sacrifice, so prominent in the Jewish system, was absent from earlier thought. The ideas of sin and atonement were peculiarly Hebrew. Jewish sacrifice was an educator in the ideas of divine holiness and human sin. Moreover, Mosaic sacrifice had a forward look. Gradually it revealed the deep sinfulness of man’s nature, and the need of a sacrifice more effectual than the “blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of heifers.” This God promised, and the faithful turned from the futility of ceremonialism to the all-sufficient sacrifice of the future.

9. We must not close this list of illustrations of the divine method of revelation without some reference to the conception

of the kingdom of God. This idea also had a basis in human thought. There were several notions which served as points of contact to which to attach the idea of a holy society under the rule of God. There was the idea of society with mutual duties, and the notion of the divine headship of the nation. God was ruler, commander, and judge. It is quite probable that many Israelites did not wholly escape the sensuous ideas of God entertained by their heathen neighbors. Very likely a large proportion of Israel regarded Jehovah in much the same way that Sennacherib looked upon Asshur—as a mighty ruler in peace, and chieftain in war. The constitutional basis for the kingdom of God was the covenant with Abraham, while the material beginning was the family of that patriarch. Revelation laid hold upon prevailing conceptions of kingship and empire. God as the source of power was an indispensable idea. There was a distinct difference between heathen thought at this point and the idea of revelation. The latter rejects the notion of physical connection between God the ruler and his people. The absoluteness of the divine government, even though administered through judges, was in accord with current ideas of kingship. But a new conception was made prominent; Israel's King was holy, and required holiness of his people. The transition from judges to kings under Samuel seems at first sight to have been a retrogression, but is best accounted for on the principle before us: that of divine accommodation to human ignorance and weakness. The great world-powers of Assyria and Egypt naturally created a strong impression of the advantages under such forms of government. The evil effects of this departure from the ideal of a direct rule of God were in part overcome by making the king immediately responsible to God, and by connecting national prosperity or adversity with the moral character of the king. It was discovered that Israel's king must be holy. The ideal king was David. The belief that they were a peculiar people, chosen by a holy God, gradually developed the conception in the prophetic mind of a holy society in which the will of God should be supreme. One purpose of Israelitish history was to evolve this ideal and reveal the utter hopelessness of realizing it

through merely human leaders and governments. Finally the prophets abandoned the hope of attaining the perfect rule of God under earthly kings, and looked to the future, when the Prince of Peace should arise and bless the whole earth with his righteous reign. It is interesting to trace through the Old Testament record the slow but sure approach to the messianic ideal. We mark the temporary use, but gradual elimination, of human elements. These served as points of contact for the revelation, but the impartation of a new and higher principle always led to the ultimate abandonment of a mere external, when its spiritual goal was reached, just as the chrysalis abandons the cocoon when it has reached the butterfly stage.

Obvious limitations forbid multiplication of examples, but enough have been suggested to indicate a permanent, beneficent principle of action in God's revelation of himself and of man's condition and destiny. There was, and is, an accommodation to human conditions and capacities. Revelation was neither abrupt nor rapid. It is seen that such divine condescension was necessitated by human ignorance. Truth presented in the abstract is rarely fully apprehended. To secure immediate appropriation of truth so given would require a miracle in human thought. The biblical miracles are few in number, and in all of them attention is chiefly directed to the thought they contain. A revelation imparted wholly, or principally, through miracles would always be open to suspicion, because so largely supernatural. God's way is partly natural. His revelation is accommodative and progressive. He does not invade the human personality and impose upon it a system of abstract truth. Rather does he adapt himself to his creature, seeking some basis in existing thought as a point of attachment for new truth. He uses concrete institutions as a medium of advanced thought. Jesus evidently followed the same plan. Where no sacrifice of essential principles was involved, he yielded to current ideas and practices. He observed Jewish forms of worship, at the same time pointing to the ideal which is independent of rites and places. He frequently used the apocalyptic language of his day, although he conveyed truth the spiritual import of

which could not be confined within the accepted literal interpretation of such symbolism. Many literalists today are stumbling over this figurative language, failing to discern its spiritual content, and overlooking the fact that the use of such expressions was an accommodation on Christ's part. From the constitution of the human mind, this must always be the wisest method of imparting truth. The iconoclast never succeeds because he goes too fast. Our missionaries conform to the divine method. They seek a point of contact for Christian thought, by using heathen ideas as far as practicable. The gospel is conciliatory in its approach. Paul's address to the Athenians begins with a consummate example of Christian apologetic (Acts 17:23; R. V. marg.).

We may fittingly close with a few of the inferences deducible from this discussion:

1. This principle of accommodation in revelation enables us to account for the human elements of the Old Testament language and religion. We are no longer confused at finding institutions which were common among the heathen sanctioned, even used, by God. They are the vehicles of new thought.

2. This principle explains and emphasizes the gradualness of revelation. There was a slow unfolding of divine truth, which was mediated through familiar institutions and forms of speech. These instrumentalities were cast aside when the truth which they conveyed was received. We are still, and probably always shall be, somewhat dependent upon external forms as aids to devotion and the apprehension of truth. We still argue the merits of Gerizim and Jerusalem, gowns and rubrics, while God patiently waits for us to realize our fellowship with him independently of forms and places.

3. The recognition of this principle of condescension does not detract from the divine character of the revelation. The truth is no less divine because imparted gradually and in a way to make it accessible. Indeed, God's manifestation has chiefly been made through human beings and institutions. It is necessarily so. The truth is more readily recognized and apprehended when thus presented. The incarnation is the most

eminent example of this method. Christ was the visible expression of God. "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." God spoke to his ancient people through altar and sacrifice, and from the mercy seat. To us he speaks through his Son. "God was in Christ." Though, from the necessities of the case, God was "*veiled* in (by) the flesh," yet God was also "*manifested* in the flesh.'



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